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Second Thoughts on an Ex-Chief Spook

By Charles Lichenstein

By poignant coincidence, while I was gathering my thoughts about Stansfield Turner's "Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition" (Houghton Mifflin, 304 pages, $16.95), a cherished friend died. At a memorial service he was described as "a complex man, yet one of simple principles." He responded to the imperatives of God and country. He was a patriot. For nearly three decades, he was an officer of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Adm. Turner is currently a lecturer and writer, who was President Carter's director of central intelligence—director of the agency and chief of the national intelligence community (which includes also the intelligence arms of State and Defense, the superelectronic spooks of the National Security Agency, the FBI and sometimes other agencies). He is best described as trendy. For four years, 1977-1981, he responded to the imperatives of the political and ideological currents then running, in the wake of Watergate (and its "rogue elephants"), of the Church and Pike committees (and their reliance on the agency's own *mea culpa*, the compilation of alleged horrors known familiarly as "the Family Jewels") and of a media-reinforced witch hunt that turned the nation's strategic intelligence capabilities into a paradigm of national interest run amok.

Bookshelf

"Secrecy and Democracy: The CIA in Transition"
By Stansfield Turner

Adm. Turner's purpose in his book seems to be a once-over-lightly treatment of the mission and organization both of the CIA and of the intelligence community as a whole. His deeper purpose may be to isolate the major failures of the past (now being revived, as he sees it, under the Reagan administration) and to show what he did to set them right. In the process, he betrays a basic ambivalence. On the one hand, he repeatedly castigates the intelligence community as a bureaucratic morass. On the other hand, he touts it as the exemplar for all democratic societies.

The more Adm. Turner now pays tribute to the professionalism and dedication of the community he once commanded, the more one is reminded of his zeal, when the power actually was his, to dismantle it. His memory is selective. The failed operations of other DCIs were "harebrained." His own? Close judgment calls.

Oh sure, he comes down on the "right" side of every conceivable issue. He never flinches from the "hard ones." Secrecy, compartmentalization, protection of sources, covert action as an indispensable supplement to bold foreign policy, human intelligence as an essential tool for getting the "feel" of the streets and bazaars, strong and subtle counterintelligence built on vast accumulated experience, analytic skills to match the best that Harvard or Berkeley can offer. Adm. Turner yields to no man in his understanding, on paper, of what it takes to provide the U.S. with an intelligence capability second to none.

That is the Stansfield Turner of the agonizing judgments—the weigher and balancer of the tensions of secret intelligence in an open and democratic society. There is apparently another Stansfield Turner, however, and it was he, alas, who actually commanded the ship in the late '70s. It was on his watch that Iran fell to the ayatollahs and Nicaragua to the Sandinist junta; that the New Jewel Movement in Grenada solidified its ties with Castro; that the Horn of Africa became a Soviet sandbox; that it took the rape of Afghanistan to "educate" his president about the reality of Soviet imperialism; that the not-so-secret Soviet "combat brigade" in Cuba came to light.

Where then were the shrewd analysts and the experienced case officers and the tough covert operatives specialists? Maybe they were among the 17 old hands he fired in the Halloween Massacre of 1977, or the 147 forced into early retirement, or the 820 slots eliminated in a two-year decimation of clandestine capabilities built up over the three preceding decades. All, to repeat, on Stansfield Turner's watch.

Driving back from the cemetery after the burial of my old friend I recalled the many hours we had spent agonizing over the hard ones, really agonizing over the really hard ones—in particular the care and feeding of a strong, professional, responsible intelligence service in our incredibly open society. My friend, a perpetual student of the politics of democracy, fully accepted the need for political oversight. He acknowledged that errors had occurred; he had participated in many of them. The craft of intelligence was his passion—even as he recognized its constraints and its imperfections. Even at its best, he knew, all that intelligence can promise is to improve the odds a bit, in our favor.

In the end, Stansfield Turner betrays the calling of intelligence by trivializing it. Adm. Thomas Moorer once said of him, he was "educated beyond his competence." Indeed. At the end of this book he gives his 11-point "agenda for action," which amounts to a string of platitudes. Point 3.a., to cite just one, is to find out "what makes the Soviet Union tick"—as if this had not been the overarching goal of U.S. intelligence from Day One.

I thus propose a Point 12 and address it to all future U.S. presidents: Appoint DCIs who are worthy of the best of the professional cadre they lead. People like my friend, for example.

Mr. Lichenstein is a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations and a senior fellow of the Heritage Foundation.